

## Socializing Dogs to People

### Canine Behavior Series

Ideally every puppy would receive a good foundation of experiences for the ability to cope with all kinds of people as an adult dog. Even if the genetics for temperament in your pup are not the best, or your pup has a bad experience when young, a good foundation of social experiences will give the best chance for a dog to have good social skills. If your puppy comes from two temperamentally-sound parents and is lucky enough to avoid any traumatic experiences with humans during formative months, you might never see problems from lack of good early socialization.

Bad experiences unfortunately happen without anyone being able to foresee or prevent them. What you can do, though, is give your dog plenty of positive experiences. That way when your dog has a bad experience with, for example, a man with a beard, several previous GOOD experiences with bearded men will have already taught your dog that a bearded man is not a bad guy!

### Quality AND Quantity

Having lots of experiences with humans will not help your dog if those experiences are of poor quality. When "quantity" means a number of bad experiences, quantity is not a good thing. Your goal is to build in your dog a belief system that most encounters with humans will be safe. Your dog learns from experiences, and those experiences need to illustrate the message you wish to teach the dog.

A dog who has high-quality positive experiences with humans may still not be adequately socialized if there are not enough experiences. Let's say you have your dog Joe out for a walk and a passing man frightens him. Perhaps the man crashes into Joe, drops something on him, or steps on his tail. Maybe it's accidental, maybe the man is under the influence of some substance, but either way, Joe has a bad experience.

If when this happens to Joe he has previously encountered 50 men on outings, 40 of whom ignored him and 10 who gave him treats, what is Joe's opinion of men likely to be? "Gee, men are usually okay, but that guy was strange!" Give Joe several good experiences with men soon after this experience and he'll likely put it into the perspective of many good experiences and decide not to worry too much about men he meets.

If Joe has inherited a difficult temperament, he may require more good experiences and more time to offset his bad experience. The same is true if Joe has not had a large number of good experiences before this unfortunate one.

It's even possible that Joe will never be able to handle exposure to men, or to whatever type of person he decides to worry about. All dogs are not equal when it comes to the socialization they need and how they will be able to handle the world, with or without good experiences. All you can do is your best.

Bear in mind, too, that some breeds were selectively bred to have temperaments you might find difficult in a companion dog. Be sure to research breeds ahead of adopting a dog to find one likely to fit your lifestyle.

To establish the good social experiences with humans that your dog needs, plan contacts with people. Dogs don't tend to catch infections from humans, so there may be places you can take your puppy to meet humans before the veterinarian wants the pup around other dogs.

Keep outings short so the puppy won't get tired, and when in doubt, carry the pup to avoid exposure to contaminated ground. Try to do a little every day. The time can increase as the puppy matures and has more stamina and a stronger immune system. Try to remain aware of the dog's stress level at all times. Your goal is for every experience to end happily.

Don't let the habit of jumping on people get started because changing this habit later can put your dog's good attitude toward people at risk. It's also much easier to prevent than to fix. Don't let anyone pet the puppy or dog who is standing on hind legs.

You can gently hold the dog in four-on-the floor position (a chest harness in addition to the collar gives you a secure handhold that doesn't pull against the dog's throat), wait until the dog quits trying to jump, or even stand on the leash so it doesn't give the dog room to jump. Don't try standing on the leash of a big dog, though, or you can get pulled over!

If you happen to have the not-uncommon combination of a shy dog who also jumps on people, you can teach the dog to do "paws up" to your forearm, and hold the dog there for people to pet. The dog is under your control, so it can be a reasonable compromise while you work on training skills and social skills with a nervous young dog.

Another way to handle the jumping-up dog is to teach the dog to sit for petting and a treat, and this is a lovely behavior. If you start the non-jumping greetings early enough in a dog's life, it becomes such a habit that the dog is trustworthy even when highly excited and when around frail people. This is a goal well worth the effort, no matter what the dog's age.

Being able to take some initiative in greeting people gives confidence to many dogs, which is one reason they jump up. Once you've taught your dog not to jump up, it's helpful to teach the dog a cue phrase for greeting people, such as "Say hi." You can add a signal to this, pointing to the person you mean.

When the dog makes the approach, the dog will tend to feel more comfortable. The same is true when a dog offers a paw to shake hands. Dogs love structure, knowing what is going to happen next, and shaking hands can satisfy this desire.

### **Variables**

Dogs notice all sorts of differences in people. With good socialization, dogs learn to ignore the differences that are not important, such as beards, hats, skin color, and the like. If you react in such a way that your dog thinks there is reason to fear that type of person, though, you can inadvertently create fear, suspicion or defensiveness in your dog toward other people. That becomes inconvenient, and sometimes downright dangerous. So strive to treat people the same no matter what their differences when you are socializing your dog!

In socializing your dog, you want to create positive experiences with every variation on the human condition you possibly can. Here are some differences to use:

1. Accustom your dog to people of as many different appearances as possible. This includes people who are tall, short, narrow, wide, bearded, short-haired, long-haired, and with skin all the colors of the rainbow. Whatever differences you and your dog come across, your goal is to teach the dog that these things are not important.
2. Get your dog used to people who smell different ways. Being in my 20th year as a therapy dog handler, I've come to believe that dogs are not as put off by scents as people are. If you don't like the way someone smells, you may notice it makes no difference to your dog. What you don't want to do is react in such a way that your dog will be afraid of that scent.
3. Let your dog get used to people moving in all sorts of ways. That means walking, running, limping, riding a bicycle, skating, skipping, and anything else you can think of or find. Keep in mind the dog's comfort and safety so your dog will have good experiences with these movements, not bad ones.
4. Accustom your dog to all sorts of sounds associated with people. That includes whispering, talking, laughing, coughing, singing, yelling, playing music electronically or with an instrument and all the other variations you can arrange.
5. Give your dog the experience of people appearing suddenly. This is startling to some dogs, so start at a distance and be prepared to distract the dog with an eye contact exercise.
6. Expose your dog to people wearing a wide variety of clothing.
7. Get your dog used to people carrying all kinds of objects. A safe distance from a construction site is a convenient place to work on this.
8. When you can actively work with your dog when someone comes to your home, this is a great opportunity to get your dog used to people in a potentially delicate situation. If you're not able to actively control the dog, though, put the dog into an area away from being able to see the visitors. You don't want any bad habits or beliefs to get started.

### **Remedies**

An eye contact or focused attention exercise is a good way to handle your dog around people the dog might find stressful. When in doubt, start with having the dog focus on you, and release the dog's attention for brief moments at a time to see how the dog reacts to the person.

If the dog reacts badly to someone, increase your distance from the person and continue to work with the dog's attention on you. In the early stages of focused attention it's usually best to use treats to keep the dog's eyes on yours. This has the added advantage of giving you a reading on the dog's stress level. If the dog normally will eat a particular treat but will not eat it in that situation, that's reason to think the situation may be too stressful.

Don't let people corner your dog. A dog on a leash may feel cornered even with a lot of space around because the dog can't get away. If someone is pushy about petting your dog and won't listen to your instructions, walk on, keeping your dog's focus on you. Yes, it's a bit snobbish, but it's good for the dog! It tells your dog that YOU will deal with the humans, and that you are a leader worthy of following.

Acting out aggression or fear tends to fix both the behavior habit and the feeling more strongly. If your dog reacts in this manner to a situation, you need to stop putting the dog in the situation. Change the situation to one the dog can handle, and work gradually up to the level your dog needs to be able to cope with.

For example, let's say your dog is afraid of men encountered on walks. You need to take your dog out to eliminate, so you'll need to work the dog around men. How can you approach this training?

First, if the dog is aggressive toward men, get the help of an expert in person to work on the problem. Aggression is not a do-it-yourself project. Ask your veterinarian to recommend a behavior specialist in your area. Aggression and shyness are two sides of the same coin, so be alert for a fearful dog to show signs of aggression. If that happens, don't delay getting help.

In the case of a dog showing mild fear without aggression, it helps to "sideswipe" people—not by hitting them as you go by! But instead of walking up to someone and stopping and putting your dog in the position of having to deal with them, just walk by the person, keeping your dog's eyes on your eyes. At first have the distance between your dog and the person fairly large—whatever it takes for the dog to feel relaxed, maybe 20 feet. The dog may also feel relaxed when your body is between the dog and the other person.

If the person is willing to help, you can walk by several times, getting closer. For the first session, that may be all you want to do. You might do just that for several sessions.

As the dog shows progress, you could make your passes closer, and slow down as you pass the person. Eventually you could stop near the person and keep your dog's attention while perhaps talking to the person.

If the dog gets more comfortable, you might have the person just lightly scratch the dog with one hand reaching from the side behind one ear—not reaching over the head. You might also have the person give the dog a treat. Another possibility is to have the person drop a treat for the dog, if you're willing to let your dog pick up food from the ground (that's a training decision).

If your dog is not showing comfort with being petted by people, you could make the choice to just teach your dog to ignore everyone else when out with you. This might seem extreme, but when you think about it, it's not so different from what some humans have to do in order to endure constant closeness to people living in neighborhoods and apartments.

In tight quarters, people give each other some "space" by simply not engaging every time they pass. Some dogs need more space than others, and if you can't give the dog physical space at that moment, you can create emotional space. With practice and teaching your dog that you can be trusted to keep things safe, this kind of space can work for many dogs.

### **Children and Puppies**

The combination of a preschool-age child and a puppy at a critical stage of socialization requires special handling. A typical result is a dog who is never good with kids because of things that happened during critical early weeks and months of the pup's life.

If you have a young child and want to add a dog to the family, your best bet is a dog already positively socialized to young kids. If you have a young child and a puppy, be aware that a puppy may not show the effects of the child's behavior until the pup is several months of age.

Be careful how any child is allowed to behave around any dog, and never leave a child under school age alone with any dog for even a second.

Good contact with dogs in the early years can have lifelong benefits for children, so it's worth a lot of effort to provide this contact for your child and the children of your acquaintance. Just make sure there is enough skilled adult supervision on every encounter. The ideal is one skilled adult handling the dog while another handles the child.

### **Companionship**

What a sociable dog can do for humans is beyond scientific measurement and beyond words. It is worth a great deal of effort to socialize your dog well with humans. It's also a lot of fun.

Dogs are the ultimate ice-breakers between people. Handling a dog skillfully around other people is challenging and fascinating. You'll be rewarded by having your dog provide even more benefits in your life, as well as in the lives of other people.

*Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book *Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others*. Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.*

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